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RUEFHLC/DEPT OF HOMELAND SECURITY WASHINGTON DC
RULSDMK/DEPT OF TRANSPORTATION WASHINGTON DC
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RHMCSUU/FAA NATIONAL HQ WASHINGTON DC
RHMFIUU/FBI WASHINGTON DC
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHINGTON DC
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RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 2620
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MUMBAI 000333

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

PASS AIAG FOR AMBASSADOR ROBERT LOFTIS, HELEN REED ROWE, AND
CRAIG SHAPIRO
SDA PASS APHIS AND FAS
DOT PASS SHATLEY
FAA PASS TNASKOVIK

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KFLU](#) [AEMR](#) [ASEC](#) [CASC](#) [KFLO](#) [TBIO](#) [KSAF](#) [KPAO](#) [PREL](#)
PINR, EAGR, IN

SUBJECT: MAHARASHTRA GOVERNMENT TAKES STEPS TO CONTROL SPREAD OF
H1N1

REF: New Delhi 1671

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11. (SBU) Summary: After a series of deaths due to the H1N1 virus in Maharashtra, the state government has taken steps to control the spread of the disease, including temporarily closing schools, malls, and cinemas, as well as pulling anti-flu drugs off retail shelves. With the media fanning fears, the shutdowns and accompanying scare have had a dampening effect on some sectors of the economy, though daily life seems to be going about as normal. Mumbai's medical infrastructure is inadequate to handle the rush of patients seeking testing and treatment, and so steps have been taken to open up additional testing facilities, as well as to allow private hospitals to treat H1N1 patients. End Summary.

H1N1 Arrives in Maharashtra

12. (U) On August 3, Maharashtra recorded its first death caused by the H1N1 virus, in Pune. Since then, 14 others have died in Pune and Mumbai. Currently, 15 of India's 20 H1N1 fatalities have been in Maharashtra. The number of reported infections has crept up as testing rates increase; at present, 1,203 individuals in India have tested positive for the disease.

The World Health Organization reports that school-age children are at greatest risk of catching H1N1, a fact which was borne out when the disease spread rapidly through Pune schools.

13. (U) The Maharashtra state government stepped into the H1N1 fracas on August 12, asking all schools and colleges to close for a one-week period and all malls and cinemas to close for a three-day period. Many public places (chain stores, gyms, etc.) have implemented their own flu policies, either requesting that sick/coughing/sneezing individuals stay away or else temporarily shutting down operations. The Mumbai public, having recently experienced bubonic plague, SARS, and avian flu scares, is not panicking over H1N1. However, individuals are taking steps perceived as protecting themselves and their families, including wearing surgical masks and keeping close to home. The media has exacerbated fears by publishing photos of parents rushing children to hospitals and widely criticizing the efforts - and competence - of Maharashtra state officials.

14. (U) Mumbai's medical infrastructure is currently unable to handle the rush of patients seeking testing and treatment. At present, only one medical facility in the city is able to collect the throat swabs used to detect the H1N1 virus (the samples are further sent on to the National Institute of Virology in Pune for testing). The government plans to expand both sample collection and testing capabilities in the Mumbai area soon. Private hospitals have been given authorization to accept H1N1 patients (previously, only government hospitals had this right), but the hospitals must first be "certified" by the government, a process which could take up to a week. The government has banned the retail sale of Tamiflu, fearing that the public may make a run on the anti-viral drug, but claims to have stockpiled enough of the drug to treat three million people.

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15. (U) The National Institute of Virology announced August 12th that it cannot be relied on for diagnostic testing as it is receiving over 800 samples a day, 600 more than it can process. As a result, the government has instructed hospitals to start Tamiflu treatment for individuals with severe influenza symptoms rather than waiting for a positive or negative H1N1 test result.

16. (U) The pandemic is having a dampening effect on the economy, especially in the countryside, where it is exacerbating the impact of the current drought. Stock prices for major retailers and movie chains fell after news of the three-day shutdown, while stock prices for pharmaceutical manufacturers rose. On the surface, business in Mumbai is continuing on largely as usual, though the government has requested that stores tone down advertising and discounts for upcoming sales in order to prevent large gatherings of people. Footfalls in malls and other shopping centers have reportedly fallen, as has air travel.

17. (U) The outbreak is being felt in political and cultural circles as well. Organizers of events surrounding the "Dahi Handi" Hindu festival, in which hundreds of thousands gather to celebrate the birthday of the Krishna, have voluntarily scaled back their August 14th festivities. The Maharashtra Chief Minister has also exhorted people to scale back celebrations of the extremely popular Ganesha festival, which starts on August 24th. Political activists from the Shiv Sena and other parties agitated for the closure of schools, and fanned fears of an epidemic. The Maharashtra government surely had its eye on the upcoming state elections in seeking to react quickly to the

epidemic.

18. (SBU) Comment: Currently the mortality rate for H1N1 in Maharashtra is very low, especially compared to the panoply of other diseases faced by the general population. Its presence and spread in schools and other public places, however, has parents spooked, and the media has played on these fears instead of introducing notes of calm. The Maharashtra government's intervention into the crisis is welcome, though many wonder if the state government would have the resources or competence to address a real public health emergency, should the situation worsen. End Comment.
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